



Maria

A Student's Perspective: The beginning is pretty easy

by **Eugenia Sestini**

The beginning is pretty easy – start with the notes. Growing up I had watched *The Sound of Music* enough times to know that the first three notes just happen to be Do-Re-Mi. Scratch that: C-D-E. Maybe it's not so simple after all. Imagine if Maria had told the von Trapp children that the first notes were C-D-E; what would she have said? C – a cricket, a cranky cricket? D – a donkey on a farm? E – an egg, a deviled egg? I know, I need to stop, it just doesn't catch on. Maria was playing a trick on the von Trapp kids, telling them that when you learn a couple of easy notes you can do anything. I had always managed to convince my language students that they could learn anything, but now that I was sitting at the other end of the table, it wasn't so easy.

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The notes – the posture – the scales – the rhythm – the chord progression – every time I feel I finally got this there's a new layer that is added and then – bam! The hour is over and I go back home and wonder if this will ever be effortless.

The first song I ever learned on the piano was at my grandma's house. It was a song about a parent begging his child to... fall asleep. Then thirty years went by until I finally had room for a keyboard at home and decided to learn for real, and hopefully play something other than a lullaby about a sleep-deprived parent.

My piano lessons typically go like this:

Teacher: This might be a little bit challenging but you can do this.

Me: [eyeroll – eyelid muscle nearly pulled]

T: No, really, you can do this.

Me: [sigh] Okay.

T: It's actually going to be super easy for you.

Me: [nervous laughter, more eyerolling, secretly thinking I should stick to watching the YouTube video of the song instead of trying to learn how to play it] Sure.

And...scene!

Eventually my grandma moved to a smaller place, and she let go of the piano, but she had a portable cassette player, one of those battery-operated rectangles that she carried everywhere like a metal handbag or a security blanket, because she needed music constantly. She was really good at memorising lyrics and singing like every song had been written for her – or by her. She had a collection of tapes which she brought when she came with us on holidays, and often asked me to help when the cassette tapes got jumbled; I'd use a pen to turn the reels around and she would sigh with relief because those tapes were such a big part of her life. I got to better understand this years later, when moments of my life seemed to have a soundtrack, and songs had strong memories and intense feelings attached to them.

I've come to embrace the reality that my playing doesn't need to be accurate, but it needs to be a source of happiness, a way to discover a side of me that was on the sidelines waiting to come out. For thirty-odd years.

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So why do I bother with this? Maybe it won't be easy but it will be possible. Turns out there are no magic beans for this, no pills you can take to speed up the learning process. Because this is a choice, it's up to me to decide when I've had enough. Because this isn't transactional, there are times when it becomes an emotional rollercoaster. And then I hit the right notes for once and it's a little moment of magic when all the hours of practice, the notes, the posture, the scales, the rhythm, the chord progression – I look down at them and tell them they don't scare me anymore. And I finally get why Maria was dancing around in circles at the start of the film instead of doing whatever else she was supposed to be doing at the abbey.

Maybe not easy but definitely worth a try.



Eugenia Sestini is a multilingual writer, language teacher and proofreader, interested in cultural identity, gender studies and family stories. In her spare time, she plays piano and tennis, reads, and makes the most of London's theatre scene. When she is not doing any of the above, Eugenia helps people organise their homes and workspaces.